DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 309 694 HE 022 552

AUTHOR Elmore, Richard F.
TITLE How We Teach Is What We Teach.
PUB DATE Apr 89
NOTE 5p.
AVAILABLE FROM American Association for Higher Education, One Dupont Circle, Suite 600, Washington, DC ($3.00).
PUB TYPE Journal Articles (080) -- Viewpoints (120)
JOURNAL CIT AAHE Bulletin; v41 n8 p11-14 Apr 1989

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Case Studies; College Faculty; *College Instruction; Critical Thinking; Educational Quality; Higher Education; Models; Quality Control; Student Participation; *Teaching Methods; *Teaching Styles

ABSTRACT

C. Roland Christensen's 13 sessions on "Teaching and the Case Method" are discussed. This collection of cases and readings on teaching with the case method in graduate professional programs and in the liberal arts is a statement of the rationale, methods, and recurring problems of the case method. It has much to say, also, about teaching and learning and about serious discourse concerning teaching and learning. Professors have invented many social conventions, such as the myth of academic freedom, to cover the lack of serious attention to teaching and learning. Direct scrutiny of a colleague's teaching is considered a violation of basic academic conduct. Another useful convention is the myth of the "art" of teaching. Sentimentalization of good teaching provides a way to recognize those who think seriously about teaching without challenging those who don't. Christensen assumes that the principle "how we teach is what we teach" forms the basis for a critical and systematic view of teaching and learning, with teaching seen as the creation, in concert with students, of a model of critical thinking, understanding, and action informed by knowledge. (SM)

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How We Teach Is What We Teach*

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by Richard F. Elmore

with an introduction

by AAHE President Russell Edgerton

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At the Harvard Business School one recent Wednesday afternoon, I dropped in on thirty faculty members participating in C. Roland Christensen's seminar Teaching by the Case Method (a commitment of thirteen 90-minute sessions). They were deep into a discussion of "the case of the puzzling student"...a complicated professor-student relationship with a familiar ending: the student had sent her final paper by overnight express, but—or so she said—it had been destroyed in a truck fire. What to do?

Was it appropriate to verify the claim by checking with the company? Should it make any difference that the student's father had recently died of cancer? That her family had endowed the university? Was the professor's own willingness to slip deadlines earlier in the semester part of the problem?

And so it went. Gradually, under Christensen's deft questioning, issues about when and where lines are drawn, when "nonacademic" considerations come into play, and a dozen deeper issues of obligation, trust, and respect were on the table. The seminar itself was a model of the kind of intense and caring preparation and the "knowledge of skill" that go into effective leadership of group discussion.

The case method has played an important role in the education of lawyers, doctors, and businesspeople. Why not in the education of teachers, and in the on-going education of professors as teachers? In Christensen's hands, cases are used to bring out generic issues cutting across the teaching of all subjects. But they could also illuminate ways to overcome difficult teaching problems within the disciplines, such as how to get across the theory of relativity or the concept of supply and demand.

Case studies could represent an important, relatively new approach to faculty development. But, as Richard Elmore's essay, beginning on page 12, suggests, the real issue is not one of technique, but of whether we are willing to take teaching seriously—as a subject for analysis and critical discussion. That such an attitude *has* been cultivated at the Harvard Business School, and is apparently spreading at the Harvard Medical School and beyond, should give hope to all of us who see a need for more powerful teaching.

—Russell Edgerton

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"How we teach is what we teach," said John H. MacArthur, dean of the Harvard Business School. These words capture the essence of [C. Roland Christensen's *Teaching and the Case Method,* see Note, page 14].

On one level, this is a collection of cases, with accompanying readings, about teaching with the case method, particularly in graduate professional programs, but also in the liberal arts. In this respect, it is a stimulating, useful, and enduring statement of the rationale, methods, and recurring problems of the case method.

If this were its only use, the collection would more than justify the investment of the considerable talents of Professor Christensen and his colleagues, and the resources of the Harvard Business School. But the collection is also about something much more fundamental and important than the case method.

It is about teaching and learning, and about serious discourse around teaching and learning, in universities and graduate professional schools. From this perspective, I think, it is a truly revolutionary contribution, in ways that the authors perhaps do not fully realize.

Conventions of discourse

Universities admire good teaching, and even occasionally reward it. But for the most part, in most institutions, serious discussion, inquiry, and rigorous thought about teaching and learning are considered beneath the professional concerns of the professoriate.

Professors spend considerable time and energy scrutinizing their students' and colleagues' research, using well-developed conventions of critical discourse around theory, method, logic, and exposition. These conventions of discourse provide a basic structure of social interaction for academics. They are the stuff of journal articles, books, prepublication reviews, panels at scholarly meetings, tenure and promotion reviews, and even occasionally lunchtime conversation. In many academic disciplines, in fact, graduate education consists almost entirely of training students in the standards of good research and in the conventions of critical discourse about that research.

University professors have invented a number of social conventions to cover for their lack of serious attention to teaching and learning.

These same university professors, faced with the task of evaluating their colleagues' teaching, often resort to amazingly superficial sources of evidence—student evaluations and course syllabi, for example—and use amazingly primitive conventions of discourse—"so-and-so doesn't seem to be getting through to the students," or "so-and-so knows the subject, but doesn't seem to be able to get it across," for example.

University professors have invented a number of social conventions to cover for their lack of serious attention to teaching and learning. The most useful is the all-purpose myth of academic freedom. Direct scrutiny of a colleague's teaching, not to

Richard F. Elmore is senior research associate, Center for Policy Research in Education, and professor, College of Education, Michigan State University, Erickson Hall, Room 406, East Lansing, MI 48824.

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mention critical analysis and discussion of it, is considered in most university settings to be a violation of a basic code of academic conduct. One does not interfere with the sacred relationship between professor and student, the argument goes, for fear of constraining the free play of ideas.

The same people who make this argument about teaching, of course, think nothing of excoriating a colleague's research in the name of the free play of ideas. Apparently, standards of critical inquiry that apply to research for some reason do not apply to teaching.

The art of teaching

Another useful convention is the myth of "the art of teaching." Some professors are gifted teachers, the argument goes, but their gifts cannot be distilled, routinized, or transmitted to others. We should revere exceptional teachers, we should treasure them, we should commemorate them, but to analyze them is to destroy their art.

This sentimentalization of good teaching provides a way of recognizing those who think seriously about teaching, without challenging those who don't.

Why is it that something so central to the basic mission of the university as teaching and learning receives so little serious scrutiny? One answer probably lies in the values, norms, and reward structures of modern universities. For people inside universities, the "real" work of the enterprise—the work to which real status attaches—is the production and diffusion of new knowledge, which, for the most part, is rarefied, inaccessible, and uninteresting to the public at large and to all but a few students.

Universities nurture myths about the value of good teaching, while, for the most part, propagating dreary instruction, to protect their real work from public scrutiny and to sustain credibility with their public patrons and their clientele.

Only a few institutions have been able to sustain a long-term commitment to serious analysis and critical discourse about teaching. The Harvard Business School is one such institution. The history of this phenomenon is carefully traced in the authors' essay in this collection ("Teaching With Cases at the Harvard Business School," pp. 16-49).

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This is less an essay about the case method, although it is useful in that regard, than it is the story of how several generations of faculty shaped a distinctive culture of teaching and learning. This story deserves the close attention of every academic with serious interest in teaching.

The model of teaching and learning that characterizes most university settings, as well as most public elementary and secondary schools, is nicely portrayed by David Cohen's formula: "Teaching is telling, knowledge is facts, and learning is recall." In this view, it is the teacher's responsibility to tell students "the stuff." It is the student's responsibility to capture the stuff. And the highest rewards go to those students who do the best job of recalling the stuff in a form that approximates what the teacher had in mind when he [or she] told it in the first place.

The main difference between university settings and lower levels of schooling is that university students, especially graduate students, are expected to assume a far larger role in capturing the stuff. The role of professors as teachers is thereby limited, providing time for other more important work.

Creating a model

Professor Christensen and his colleagues have constructed a *tour de force* against these conventional notions of teaching and learning. For Christensen, the principle "how we teach is what we teach" forms the basis for a critical and systematic view of teaching and learning.

In this view, teaching is not telling; it is creating a model of critical thinking, understanding, and action informed by knowledge in concert with students. In the words of Alfred North Whitehead,

quoted approvingly by Christensen, "What the faculty have to cultivate is activity in the presence of knowledge. What the students have to learn is activity in the presence of knowledge" (p. 16).

Active learning occurs when teachers inspire, encourage, and provoke students' engagement in the construction of knowledge. Learning is not recall; learning is the active use of ideas to solve problems. Teaching-as-telling, therefore, is not simply a neutral way of transmitting the stuff; it conveys a passive and uncritical view of learning that removes the student from the role of active problem solver.

Most university professors subscribe to the ideal of students as problem solvers. Christensen and colleagues define a pedagogy that implements that ideal, and it is quite different from the pedagogy that is practiced in many university classrooms.

A new language

The cases and readings in this collection are designed to provide the intellectual basis for a model of university teaching based on active learning, but more importantly, also to provide a new language of critical discourse about teaching and learning.

For Christensen and his colleagues, teaching is a legitimate topic of critical discourse and analysis. Analysis, even at the level of mundane details like sequencing, pacing, initiating discussion, determining the order in which students will be called upon, does not trivialize teaching.

On the contrary, analysis creates a language for discourse about teaching, not unlike the language that academics use to criticize one another's research. From this discourse grows heightened attention to more and less effective ways of actively engaging students in the creation of their own knowledge.

Case studies of teaching are one way of fostering this critical discourse. They encourage analysis of a common set of facts, rather than of one's own classroom performance. The cases in this collection raise the full range of practical problems involved in encouraging active learning, including the typical objections raised by partisans of teaching-as-telling toward teaching methods that rely heavily on student discussion. The intrusion of blind prejudice, divergent questions, interpersonal conflict, domineering participants, and a number of other issues are framed in a way that encourages serious thought but focuses on solutions.

For Christensen, teaching is a legitimate topic of critical discourse and analysis. . . . Case studies of teaching are one way of fostering this critical discourse.

Interspersed with the cases are a number of articles about teaching, learning, listening, responding, conceptions of knowledge, and critical discourse about teaching, which are surely the most useful and comprehensive collection on these topics available in one place.

The cases, readings, and teaching notes grew out of the experience of the Harvard Business School faculty with the case method of teaching, and more specifically, out of the experience of Christensen, and others, in conducting seminars for a variety of audiences about effective teaching at the undergraduate and graduate professional levels. Hence, all the materials have been field-tested with a variety of audiences.

With this collection, Christensen and his colleagues have, in effect, issued a challenge to university professors, and especially to the faculty of graduate professional schools. That challenge is, first, to take teaching and learning seriously enough to subject it to the same level of scrutiny as research, and second, to develop models of teaching that treat students as active agents in the creation of their own knowledge. ■

Note

Teaching and the Case Method: Text, Cases, and Readings, by C. Roland Christensen, with Abby J. Hansen. Boston: Harvard Business School, 1987.

Teaching and the Case Method: Instructor's Guide, by C. Roland Christensen, with Abby J. Hansen and James F. Moore. Boston: Harvard Business School, 1987.